Climate crisis: Western Europe experiences its hottest summer on record

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The summer of 2026 has proven to be the hottest on record in Western Europe. According to measurements by the European Union's (EU) Copernicus Climate Change Service, June and July were the hottest since temperature records began. The average temperature over these two months was around 21.6 degrees, almost 2.8 degrees Celsius above the long-term average. In the US, too, this July was the hottest month on record.

As early as June, the average temperature in Europe was 3.06 degrees Celsius above the long-term average, and the heatwaves have continued unabated ever since. The world's oceans (with the exception of the polar regions) have also been warmer than ever before since this July. In Mallorca, the highest water temperature ever recorded was measured at 33 degrees.

Massive wildfires are occurring time and again in Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Greece. Since the start of this year, there have already been more than twice as many major fires in Spain as in 2025; as a result, a state of emergency was declared for the first time in July.

In southern France and Spain, hundreds of firefighters are still battling to prevent the flames from spreading, and many people have lost all their possessions. In the small département of Lozère, two villages had to be evacuated on 9 August. The fire that raged near Bordeaux in the Gironde is now considered the largest forest fire since 1949, and it has not yet been completely extinguished. 42,000 hectares of land have been destroyed there so far.

In Central Europe, the ongoing drought and heatwaves have led to dramatically low water levels. Major waterways such as the Rhine and the Danube are at historic lows. Cargo ships are now carrying just 20 per cent of their usual load and are close to ceasing operations altogether.

At locations such as Koblenz and Andernach, the water level of the Rhine is two metres below the long-term average. As a result, Thyssenkrupp Steel has been forced to scale back production at its main plant in Duisburg. Chemical companies such as BASF and Evonik, as well as other corporations, are also responding to the reduced supply from inland waterway transport.

The Danube and other rivers are also affected. The low water levels are jeopardising the cooling systems of numerous power stations. In Poland, the Kozienice and Po?aniec coal-fired power stations were forced to reduce output due to dangerously low water levels in the Vistula.

And even nuclear power, the so-called "bridge technology," is proving unable to cope with the extreme heat: Due to low water levels in the Danube, the Paks nuclear power station in Hungary had to be shut down on Saturday, as it is cooled by river water. Power output was also reduced at several reactors in France, Romania and Switzerland due to the cooling water being too warm. The Swiss Beznau nuclear power station was temporarily taken off the grid due to the Aare River being unusually warm at over 25 degrees. On Thursday, Romania shut down the second reactor at the Cernavod? nuclear plant, which accounted for about 20 percent of the country's power generation.

The economic damage caused by the low water levels is enormous and, according to warnings from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW), could be "severe enough to reduce gross domestic product by 0.1 to 0.2 percent in the third quarter."

But how is bourgeois politics responding? In Germany, they are taking just one concrete measure: the ban on trucks driving on Sundays is being lifted. Ten federal states have so far lifted the ban on trucks driving on Sundays and public holidays.

This measure is telling: it demonstrates the utter failure of German politics, which has no answer to climate change. To replace a single large inland waterway vessel or pushed convoy on the Rhine, 150 to 175 trucks are required. If this measure were to be permanent, the motorway infrastructure would have to be expanded rapidly. This is because rail transport, too, has been systematically run into the ground by cost-cutting in recent years and is being further decimated. Since this spring, DB Cargo, Germany's freight rail company, has been implementing a drastic "restructuring" programme, under which a further 14,000 full-time jobs are set to be cut by 2030.

For years, those in power have focused on profit-driven economics and war at the expense of the genuinely important social issues. Climate change has been known about for 40 years, yet all warnings are being ignored. What is needed is the restoration of land cover, large-scale reforestation and

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consistent adherence to scientifically sound climate targets. Sustainable energy sources need to be promoted instead of coal, gas and nuclear power stations.

Yet the opposite is happening. The eleven largest listed oil and gas companies—including Shell, BP, TotalEnergies and Equinor—plan to increase their production by an average of 14 per cent between 2024 and 2030. Six leading European oil companies generated profits of $21.7 billion in the first quarter of 2026—a 43 percent increase compared with the same period last year, fuelled further by the war in Iran.

Instead of pulling the emergency brake, Europe's capitalist governments are caught up in the frenzy of war preparations. The German federal budget for 2026 pushes military spending to €108 billion—the highest defence budget in the history of the Federal Republic. The funds allocated by the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union and the Social Democrats for rearmament amount to one trillion euros. While local authorities lack the funds for water points, cooling centres and air-conditioning in hospitals, care homes and schools, all of society's resources are being channelled into the war machine.

Yet scientists are warning that the groundwater level—the freshwater treasure from which people draw their drinking water—is now at risk of failing to replenish itself. Behind this lies a process that may seem paradoxical at first glance: the accelerated melting of glaciers does not lead to more water, but—in the long term—to ever less water being available.

This is because the glaciers—these natural freshwater reservoirs on which hundreds of millions of people in Europe, Asia and South America ultimately depend—are threatened by several mutually reinforcing mechanisms: Extreme heat accelerates the melting process, causing more water to flow into rivers in the short term. However, once "peak water"—the point at which maximum meltwater discharge is reached—is exceeded, the ice mass shrinks so drastically that, despite persistently high temperatures, less and less water is released. In Switzerland, it is predicted that the Alps could be completely ice-free by the end of the century.

Another important factor is the so-called albedo effect, which describes the reflectivity of surfaces. As the bright ice and snow surfaces—which reflect solar radiation back into space—disappear, the darker earth's surface is exposed, absorbing more heat and further accelerating global warming.

A point has now been reached where the extreme heat is causing such intense evaporation that even the additional meltwater cannot compensate for the loss. The soil dries out before water can even seep into the groundwater. At the same time, there is a lack of rainfall.

Christian Griebler, an ecologist and climate researcher in Austria, commented: "It's going to get much, much worse. On top of the heat, which is accompanied by heavy evaporation and causes drought, we're seeing weather characterised by very, very little rainfall. Despite the melting glaciers, the groundwater level is falling."

Tim Staeger from the ARD Weather Competence Centre also noted that the current weather "is no one-off. As a result of climate change, summers like this will become increasingly frequent and intense. We will continue to experience such major heatwaves in the future, and droughts will also remain a feature of our lives in the coming years and decades."

The prolonged heatwave is extremely taxing on human health and life-threatening. The Robert Koch Institute reported 12,500 heat-related deaths in Germany between the start of April and the end of July. Of these, 9,600 were attributed to the extreme heatwave in the second half of June.

France reported more than 5,700 deaths. Other estimates are even higher, such as an analysis by Politico, which puts the number of excess deaths during the June heatwave across six countries at 14,000.

Statistik Austria recorded a 20 percent increase in mortality during the first heatwave in June. The WHO estimates that, in the last four years alone, around 200,000 people across Europe have died as a result of extreme heat—deaths which, according to the organisation, would have been "entirely preventable."

In sweltering cities, there is a lack of shaded green spaces, water points and cooling centres. Public buildings, particularly hospitals, care homes and schools, lack air-conditioning. Care staff, who have to work in oppressive heat, are facing a growing influx of patients: cancer, diabetes, asthma and mental health conditions are worsening under these extreme conditions. This additional challenge is hitting a healthcare system already worn down by decades of austerity and privatisation. Yet local authorities lack the funds for heatwave prevention, while unlimited resources are available for military rearmament.

All this shows that the struggle against climate change and for an environment fit for human life is inseparable from the struggle against capitalism. Only the international working class has the potential to win this struggle. It is crucial to build the necessary Marxist leadership for this—the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections in Europe and throughout the world.

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